



# Montgomery County Council

*From the office of Councilmember Tom Perez*

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## News Release

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### **Perez Urges Expanding MD Hate Crime Law**

*Councilmember Supports Protecting Gays, Women and People with Disabilities against 'Equal Opportunity Bigots'*

Charging that prosecutors too often are "fighting the battle against bigotry with one hand tied behind their back," County Councilmember Tom Perez this week urged passage of state legislation that would expand Maryland's hate crime law by adding sexual orientation, gender and disability to the categories of people currently protected by the statute. The bill also includes language that would make violence based on a person's "actual or perceived" status a crime.

Recalling his own experiences as a former federal prosecutor fighting neo-Nazi groups, Perez said such groups are "equal opportunity bigots." Not only do they hate African Americans, Jews, Arab Americans and other immigrants, he said, "they also hate gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered people with equal fervor, as well as women."

Perez's comments were made during his testimony this week before the Maryland General Assembly's House Judiciary Committee which is considering a bill, HB322, that would address the gaps that exist in hate crime law. Currently, Maryland law does not include sexual orientation, often preventing successful prosecution of "gay bashing" incidents as hate crimes, said Perez, who helped draft similar hate crime legislation while a staff member on the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee.

The bill being considered by Maryland legislators would change the law to add sexual orientation, gender and disability to the categories of people protected by the statute. About 30 states already have expanded their hate crime laws to include these categories. The bill also includes an amendment to close a loophole in the law that makes it difficult to successfully prosecute hate crimes based on a person's "actual or perceived" status.

During his testimony, Councilmember Perez, who also works as an assistant professor at the University of Maryland Law School, noted that his support to expand the hate crime law was in an individual capacity, not on behalf of the County Council or the university system.

As a former federal prosecutor, Perez said he never had "a legitimate answer" for the gay person who would ask why Perez could prosecute hate crimes against people of color but not hate crimes committed against gays and lesbians.

"There is no difference in my mind between the two crimes," Perez said, "yet the law recognizes a difference. This is wrong, and we should change it."

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